Busted Micro-Concerto

Five Animated Shorts

PSAPPHA

Tim Williams *percussion*
Nicholas Kok *conductor*

Introduction by Steven Mackey

People tell me that my music is very ‘American’, whatever that means. It probably has to do with a generally optimistic outlook and my wide range of influences including rock and world music as well as a willingness to go a bit against the grain with my use of the electric guitar. Whether American or not, my sense of rhythm, both on the smallest motivic scale and the larger scale of continuity is probably the most characteristic element of my music and that which causes performing ensembles to sink or swim, rock or not.

Nothing is more gratifying to me than to travel across the Atlantic to work with musicians from backgrounds and accents different from mine, and to feel immediately that they ‘get’ my music, that they feel the rhythm. That was my experience with Psappha from the first rehearsal I attended. The members of this ensemble play my music as if it were in their bones. If one was to multiply their talent by their impeccable preparation, and factor in what soulful, ethical, and pleasant people they are, their score would be unsurpassed.

This recording is all about rhythm – as one would expect from a percussion solo, percussion concerto and a work that features cimbalom. That is not to say that nothing else matters but rather that the thrust of the harmonies, lines and timbral combinations gives the rhythm a very particular character.

Steven Mackey (born 1956)
Micro-Concerto for percussion and five instruments

1. *Chords and Fangled Drum Set*
2. *Interlude #1 Vibes Solo*
3. *Clik, Clak, Clank*
4. *Interlude #2 Marimba and Cello – (attacca)*
5. *Tune in Seven*

When I was a young composer in the mid-1980s the so-called Pierrot ensemble (flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, named after Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*) with or without added percussion, was the ubiquitous 'mod-music' group. It has a certain economic appeal in that you get a little of everything but, because of that, every concert you went to had pieces by students and teachers wrestling with this Spartan orchestra in a post-Schoenbergian expressionist idiom. I had only written two pieces for this ensemble and felt the need to transform the ensemble into something more sympathetic to my background and interests, something more lively. In *Micro-Concerto*, the featured role of the percussionist playing a combination of toys, kitchen utensils and 'legit' instruments makes the ensemble a little more playful. A recurring strategy in the composition of the non-percussion parts is to have them occasionally get stuck on one or a couple of oddly articulated notes, bringing them closer to the spirit of percussion.

Another seminal influence on *Micro-Concerto* was the Percussive Arts Society National Convention I attended in 1992. There I witnessed a 90-minute clinic on state of the art techniques for playing crash cymbals. I confess that there was something humorously esoteric about the event, but I left inspired to imagine particular ways to coax sound out of pieces of wood, metal and skin instead of simply hitting things.

It woke me to the fact that the first step in writing for percussion is to invent both the instrument and a playing technique. I rented and set up all the instruments for *Micro-Concerto* in my basement and learned to play every single measure. (I can't however play more than one measure at a time.) This led me to some unconventional techniques but luckily percussionists in general, and Tim Williams in particular, tend to have an adventurous attitude about this: if they can reach it with an arm or leg, or hold it in the mouth, it is fair game. I'm fascinated by the one-man band mentality of juggling contrasting timbres produced by a line-up ranging from finely crafted instruments to kitchen utensils and hobby shop paraphernalia. Watching Williams perform this piece is a hoot, especially in the last movement, where his foot is playing the kick bass drum, his

hands are firing off timbale riffs while shaking a maraca, and he is blowing on a samba whistle. There are no special effects – there is only one player in real time.

In addition to providing a virtuoso vehicle for the percussionist, *Micro-Concerto* also explores a variety of more complex roles that the individual can play in relation to the ensemble. In Movement 1, 'Chords and Fangled Drum Set', the rhythm is front and centre. I imagine that the piano chords harmonize the rhythm instead of the rhythm measuring the harmonies.

Movement 2, 'Interlude #1, Vibes Solo', is a short, lyrical ballad.

In Movement 3, 'Clik, Clak, Clank', the percussionist is neither an accompanying rhythm section nor leading melody. I think of the percussionist as a contextualizing and interpreting narration spoken in some imaginary tongue-clicking language.

In Movement 4, 'Interlude #2, Marimba and Cello', the two instruments are completely co-dependent; the story is told only by their interplay. In some sense they are a single instrument with timbres no more disparate than the clickers and samba whistle that are part of the percussionist's instrument in Movement 3. This movement flows without pause into Movement 5, 'Tune in Seven'. In the first half of the movement the percussionist is one of six players tossing around a set of variations on the tune. Towards the end, the percussionist returns to the 'fangled drum set' and shifts the focus back to what must be (along with singing) the most fundamental form of musical expression – hitting things in time.

The two interludes are played on big, standard pieces of percussion 'furniture', but the main movements focus on small moves and subtle distinctions. They are full of fussy descriptions of how to play some hand-held 'toy' just so. This micro-management of small muscle groups, and the fact that the concerto soloist is accompanied by the smallest orchestra imaginable, suggested the title.

Micro-Concerto was commissioned by a Meet the Composer grant and premiered by the New York New Music Ensemble in 1999.

Steven Mackey
Five Animated Shorts

1. *Depending*

2. *Dancing For Sarah*

3. *Slippery Dog*

4. *Still in Motion*

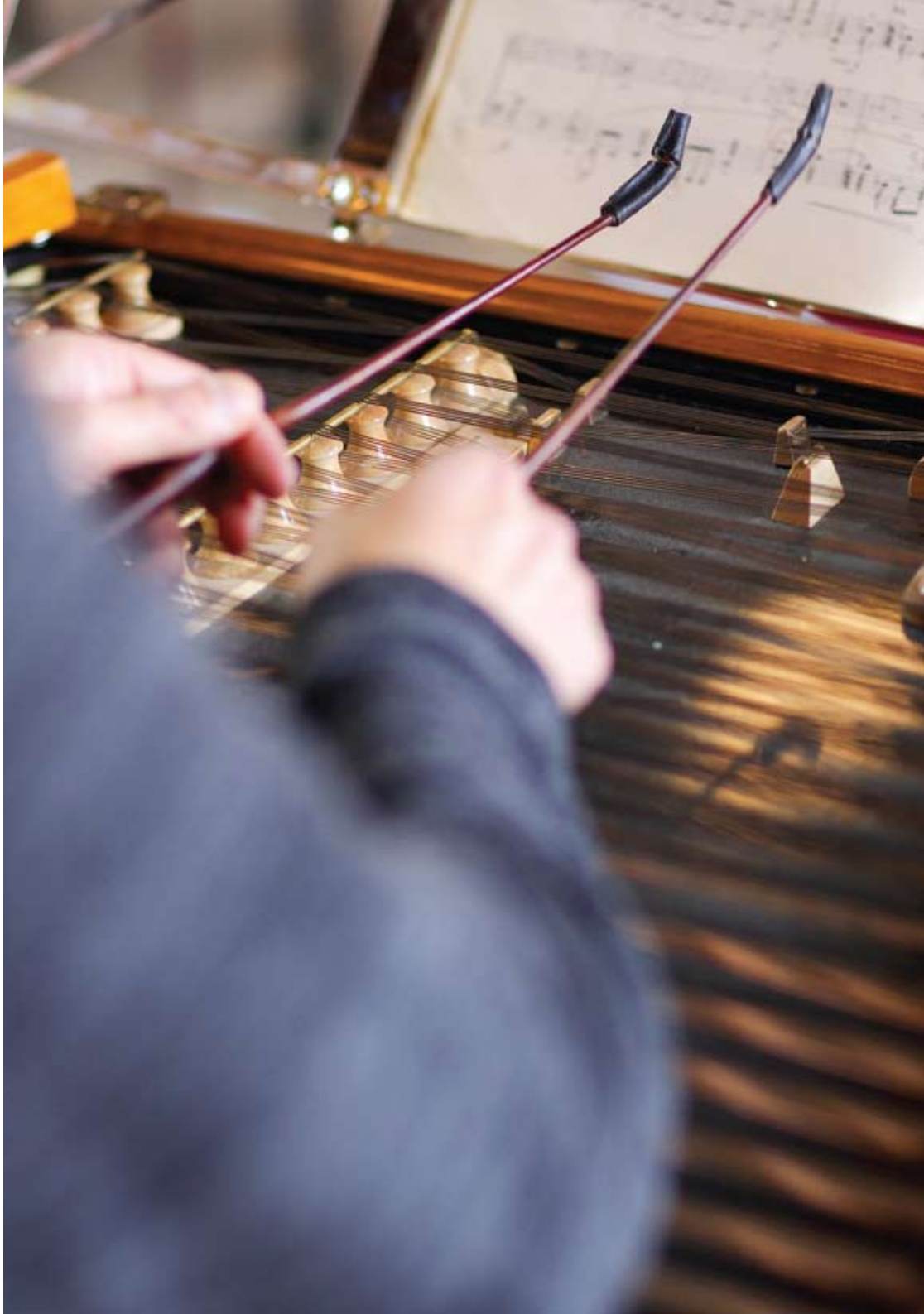
5. *Lonely Motel*

The idea to write a piece for cimbalom and mixed ensemble came from Tim Williams. As a percussionist and artistic director of Psappha, Tim had performed my music often and knew that I was sympathetic to 'underdog' instruments, those not entirely embraced by the western concert music establishment. Tim taught himself how to play the cimbalom out of love for the instrument and he is now one of only a few concert cimbalom players outside Hungary.

I associate the cimbalom primarily with gypsy, vernacular music although I am familiar with its use by composers such as Kurtág. Tim and I were both interested in a piece that used the cimbalom within an ensemble and not as though in a concerto. I thought of the cimbalom in a more indigenous setting (as at Tim's wedding) where it plays exhilarating folk music with other instruments (guitar, violin, bass etc.). In that context the cimbalom at times leads the music, the way a singer might, by presenting the tune and embellishing it, and at other times it is simply part of the ensemble. The cimbalom is never in opposition or competition with the group as a concerto soloist often is.

All of the instruments, at some point, have important solo roles. The piano, in particular, shares the spotlight with the cimbalom. The different but related timbres between the two instruments, both struck with felt hammers, is an important orchestrational focus of the piece. The primary effect of the cimbalom in the ensemble is to transform, from within, the familiar modern music group into something rather exotic.

The form and substance of Five Animated Shorts were influenced by discussions and preliminary work I had done with a frequent



collaborator Rinde Eckert. We were leading a workshop on creating experimental music theatre for which he invented a character – a scientist performing psychological experiments involving the identification of out of focus slides. Rinde wrote the following text:

Slide

Slide of

Slide of dog

Slide of dog running

Dog running

Running

This was just one of many hypothetical images that Rinde described on behalf of his psychologist alter ego. Rinde and I are both dog owners/lovers. I liked the idea of writing music that would both set this text and animate the implicit motion in a still photo of a running dog. I liked the simple additive and subtractive process that connects the single word 'Slide', at the top, to 'Running', at the bottom. The motion between 'Slide' and 'Running' connects them as action words even though 'Slide' started life as a noun. Issues pertaining to this line of text permeate *Slippery Dog* and *Still in Motion*.

As I began composing for cimbalom with all these ideas as a backdrop (instrumental folk music via cimbalom, dogs, running, sliding, creepy scientists with projectors, etc.) the music started to take shape as four short character sketches followed by a long lullaby (*Lonely Motel*). Each movement seems to have a little narrative to share or scene to draw and because of the quirky characters and generally bright, playful colours, the medium of short animated films seemed like a helpful metaphor to invoke in the title, not to mention the fact that four of the five pieces are animated and relatively short.

Five Animated Shorts was commissioned by Psappha, the Cheltenham Music Festival with funds provided by Beryl Calver-Jones and Gerry Mattock and the Network for New Music with support from the Philadelphia Music Project, an Artistic Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trust, administered by the University of the Arts.

Steven Mackey
Busted for solo percussion

Busted begins by exploring two elements: a loose, relaxed gesture of dropping the mallets on the drumhead and allowing them to bounce is contrasted with taut, tense, forceful attacks. These elements unfold in an odd, bumpy rhythm, which flirts with an elusive groove. The forceful attacks gradually take over with an increasing sense of desperation and 'bust' through the complex patterns to a funky 4/4 groove accompanying a timbale solo.

The title first occurred to me when I felt the need to derail a runaway groove with a police whistle – *busted*, as in caught in the act. It also seemed appropriate to the way I imagined a percussionist busting through the drumheads with primal two-fisted attacks.

CODA

This recording is another landmark in my long collaboration with Psappha. I first performed with them in 1998. Four years later we went on a two-week tour sponsored by the Contemporary Music Network. In 2005 I composed *Five Animated Shorts* particularly for them (why else would I write for cimbalom?) and now we are jointly involved on this premiere recording featuring *Five Animated Shorts* and *Busted*. I hope our collaboration continues for several more decades.

Steven Mackey © 2009

About the composer Steven Mackey

Steven Mackey has composed for chamber ensembles, orchestras, music-theatre and dance. His pioneering work has brought the electric guitar, often with Steve as soloist, into collaboration with musicians from around the world including the San Francisco, St. Louis, and Dutch Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles and BBC Philharmonic Orchestras, the Arditti, Brentano and Kronos Quartets, London Sinfonietta, Psappha and many others. He has been on the faculty at Princeton University since 1985 serving as head of the music department between 2008 and 2011.

www.stevenmackey.com

PSAPPHA

Nicholas Kok	*conductor*
Conrad Marshall	*flute* (Micro-Concerto)
Kevin Gowland	*flute* (Five Animated Shorts)
Dov Goldberg	*clarinet*
Richard Casey	*piano*
Tim Williams	*percussion* (Micro-Concerto/Busted) *cimbalom* (Five Animated Shorts)
John Melbourne	*percussion* (Five Animated Shorts)
David Routledge	*violin*
Jennifer Langridge	*cello*

Specialising in the performance of music by living composers and that of the 20th and 21st centuries, Psappha was formed in 1991 by its Artistic Director Tim Williams. The ensemble has an extensive and exceptionally varied repertoire of hundreds of works and a reputation for technical assurance and interpretive flair. It won the Manchester Evening News Award for Opera in 2000 and has been shortlisted by the prestigious Royal Philharmonic Society Awards on two occasions.

Psappha has commissioned and premiered many works by a wide range of composers including the award-winning music-theatre work, *Mr Emmet Takes a Walk*, by its Patron Peter Maxwell Davies, released on the ensembles own label.

Based in Manchester, Psappha has appeared throughout the UK, at most of the country's major music festivals, including the BBC Proms, in special Henze and Maxwell Davies portrait series in London's South Bank, and in a residency at the St. Magnus Festival, Orkney in 2009. It has made highly successful tours to North and South America, Australia, Belgium, France, Holland, Ireland, Jersey, Portugal and Spain. In addition to six recordings on various labels, it launched its own CD label in 2004 with Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* and *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot*.

Psappha is developing its online presence with a number of concerts available to view as webcasts and also the development of a major online resource for 12 - 18 year olds. Education projects for people of all ages represent an important part of Psappha's schedule both in the UK and abroad. It was awarded the Swatch City Life Award for Best Concert Series and Education Work and is currently The University of Manchester's Contemporary Ensemble in Association.

www.psappha.com

Nicholas Kok *conductor*

Nicholas Kok is an extremely versatile conductor and musician. In the concert hall, the opera house and on radio he has conducted numerous world and British premieres, including works by Birtwistle, Holt, Maxwell Davies, Reich, Turnage and Xenakis. He is Psappha's Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor. From 1996 to 2006 Nicholas was Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of sinfonia ViVA (formerly East of England Orchestra), with which he performed an extremely large and varied repertoire and is now the orchestra's Principal Guest Conductor.

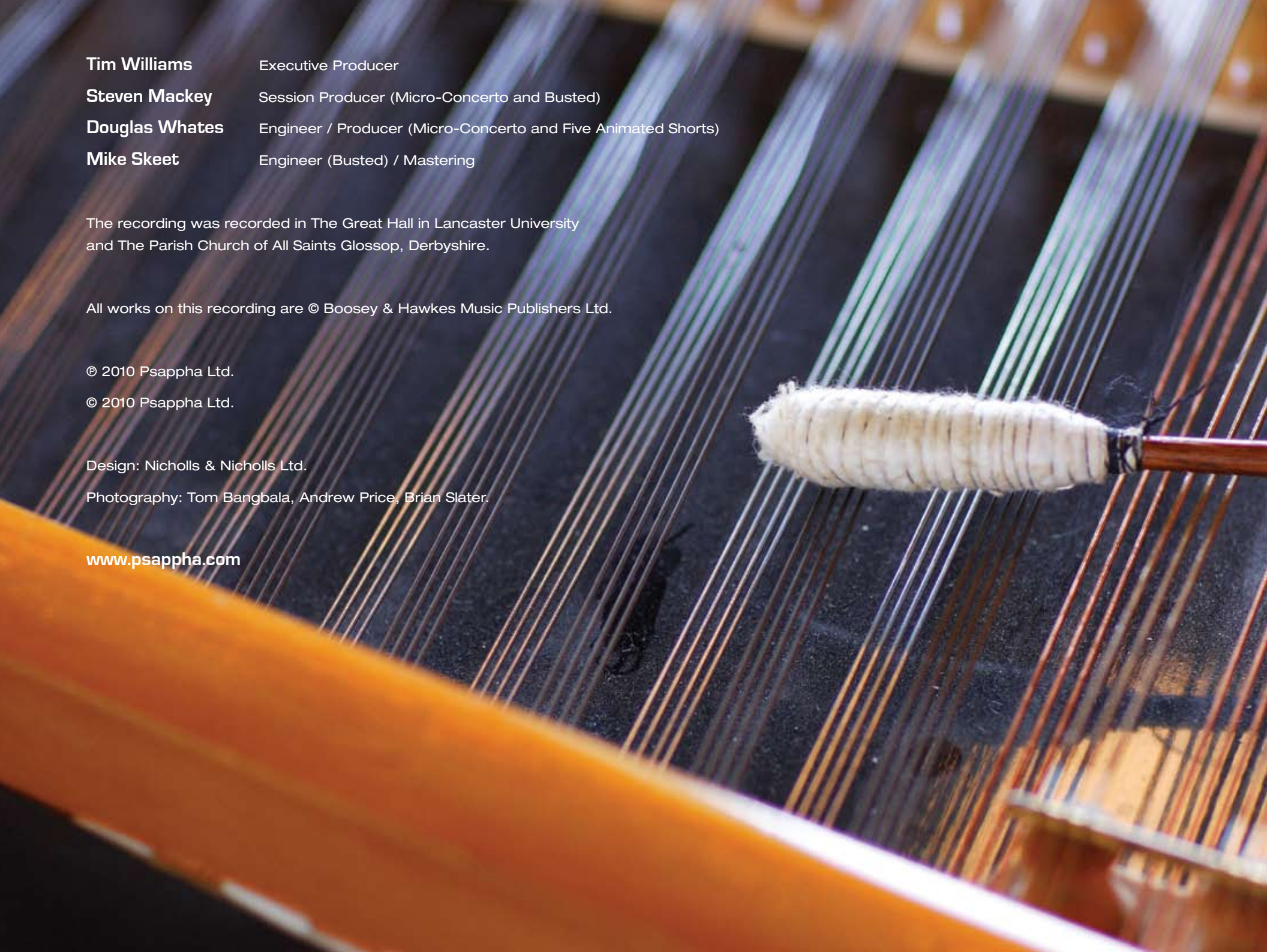
Nicholas has worked with many leading orchestras and ensembles, both in the UK and abroad. In the opera house he has conducted a very broad repertoire, ranging from Monteverdi, Handel and Mozart to Humperdinck, Rossini and Britten, appearing regularly with companies such as ENO, Opera North and Staatsoper Stuttgart. He enjoys a very close relationship with the BBC Singers with whom he has recorded a huge amount of repertoire, and with Scottish Ballet, appearing regularly with the company at the Edinburgh Festival.

Tim Williams *percussion solo*

Tim Williams has performed with most of the UK's symphony orchestras, opera and ballet companies as a freelance percussionist and timpanist. His particular interest in new music led him to form the ensemble Psappha in 1991. Since its inception he has been its Artistic Director and also its percussionist. With the ensemble he has performed throughout the UK, in Europe (France, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Ireland & Belgium), North America (New York and San Francisco), South America (Caracas and Buenos Aires) and Australia (Barossa Festival).

He has been featured prominently in such works as Stockhausen's *Kontakte* (also broadcast on BBC Radio 3), Birtwistle's *The Axe Manual*, Peter Maxwell Davies's *Stedman Doubles* (original 1955 version) (also recorded for CD and BBC Radio 3), Steven Mackey's *Micro-Concerto* (UK tour and CD recording), Martin Butler's *Going with the Grain*, Gordon McPherson *Little Moses* (also recorded for CD and BBC Radio 3), Alvarez's Temazcal, Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maitre* (also recorded for BBC Radio 3) and Anthony Gilbert's *Moonfaring* (UK tour and recorded for CD).

In 1999 Tim Williams went to Budapest, bought a cimbalom (Hungary's national instrument) and taught himself to play it, going on to perform many works on the cimbalom including Stravinsky's *Renard* and *Ragtime* (BBC Proms), Boulez's *Eclat/Multiples* (London Sinfonietta), Mackey's *Five Animated Shorts* (Network for New Music, Philadelphia and Princeton and with Psappha, Cheltenham Festival, Lancaster, webcast and CD recording), Peter Maxwell Davies's *Image, Reflection, Shadow* (UK tour), Peter Maxwell Davies's *Sonatina* and *Farewell to Stromness*. In 2001 he worked on *Scenes from a Novel* with its composer György Kurtág at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. He has had works written for him by Gordon McPherson (*Memory Crash* and *Lorelei*), Anthony Gilbert (*Vers de Lune*), John Casken (*Fractured Lines*). He has also taken part in Kodály's singspiel *Háry János* on a number of occasions, Howard Shaw's *Lord of the Rings Symphony* and Kurtág's *Stele*.



Tim Williams	Executive Producer
Steven Mackey	Session Producer (Micro-Concerto and Busted)
Douglas Whates	Engineer / Producer (Micro-Concerto and Five Animated Shorts)
Mike Skeet	Engineer (Busted) / Mastering

The recording was recorded in The Great Hall in Lancaster University and The Parish Church of All Saints Glossop, Derbyshire.

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